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METHOD OF TEACHING ENGLISH LITERATURE.¹

I REGARD the teaching of English literature and the teaching of spelling, grammar, and rhetoric as two different professions. It is in many respects unfortunate that both should have to be practiced by a single teacher, or a single department, for the best teacher of literature may be the worst teacher of spelling, grammar, and rhetoric; but, as our curriculums are at present ordained, we have to face the situation as best we can. Let us frankly recognize, however, that we *are* dealing with two widely different sets of subjects; that the methods that succeed in the teaching of spelling and grammar may fail utterly with literature; and that experience gained in one branch cannot be an infallible guide in the other.

My own experience has been almost wholly in the teaching of literature, and methods of elementary instruction in that branch will be the subject of this paper. I wish, however, by way of preface, and in order to avoid a possible misunderstanding, to state briefly an opinion concerning both branches.

There is much complaint against the manner in which kindergarten ideas have invaded secondary schools and colleges. I hear it said that we do not *discipline* our scholars enough; and that that is why they are growing up illiterate. Now, my opinion is that, in so far as this complaint relates to our teaching of spelling, grammar, and rhetoric, it is not without foundation; I believe that in those subjects some of us do trust too much to Kindergarten methods—to literary methods; and I am glad to see a revival of the good old-fashioned *discipline*. On the other hand, in the teaching of English literature I think the idea of discipline is already carried rather too far, and that our schools and colleges would do better if they employed less of what is commonly called discipline than they actually do. In this paper I propose to defend what to many will seem altogether too lax a

¹ A paper read before the New England Association of Teachers of English, November 15, 1902.

method; but I wish it distinctly understood that I am referring only to the teaching of literature, and that, if I were discussing spelling, grammar, or rhetoric, I should speak very differently.

The first problem that caused me much trouble in my own experience was as to the degree of minute thoroughness desirable in reading. The average student has a very small vocabulary, and, of course, we want him to extend it. Suppose you are teaching *Macbeth*. Your first lesson brings you to Paddock, Graymalkin, kerns, gallowglasses, Bellona's bridegroom, and a score or more of other expressions that your student may not know unless he looks them up; and, of course, he will not look them up unless you make him—that is, unless you devote much of your time to quizzing the class upon particular words, and insist upon having everything explained.

Of course, the objection to such a plan is the dryness of the toil involved. Our average student finds it a positively repellent task, and our object is to make literature attract him. On the other hand, if you do not make him look up the words he does not know, will he know Shakespeare at all? How much of the exquisite beauty of *Romeo*, how much of the sublimity of *Lear*, is wholly lost upon the student who has not studied Shakespeare's language. For every difficulty that you pass over in silence, you will inevitably feel a sting of conscience, and toward every student with whom you practice the laxer method you will have moments of feeling yourself a criminal.

Nevertheless, after some years of varied experiments and after much reflection, I have long since abandoned the stricter method, and for the last three or four years I have been adding to the burdens of my conscience about three hundred crimes per annum. It is true that I feel, after teaching *Hamlet*, or *Lear*, or *Othello*, that none of my students really know Shakespeare; but, then, who does? They cannot know him except in part, and the question for the teacher to decide is: What part? I have satisfied myself that, so far as my own younger students are concerned, they will know less about him if they are forced to read him in what I should call a thorough manner than if they are let off more easily. In the former case, the average boy will

assuredly not like him; and the knowledge of Shakespeare possessed by anybody who does not like him must of necessity be of small value.

This seems but a superficial argument; but there is a deeper principle underlying it. Let us look at the question in another way. Let us suppose that our chief interest is merely to increase the student's vocabulary. Even so, I think it might be plausibly urged that the best way to accomplish this is not by making him study words. He will enrich his vocabulary more by wide reading than by thorough reading. Consider how we ourselves have learned the language. I have no idea how large my effective vocabulary is, but I am certain that not more than 1 per cent. of it consists of words that I have looked up. And, moreover, in a matter of this kind, it will not do to count merely the *numbers* of words that we know. The quality of our knowledge is more important to us than the quantity. From dictionaries and text-books I have learned such words as "sclerosis," "kilogram," "epistemological," "isogeotherm," "dicotyledinous." A friend of mine has recently acquired the word "radiomicrometer," and he has three times in the last fortnight introduced it casually into conversation about the weather, with excellent effect. Such words as these are showy things to wear on the outside, but the part of our vocabulary that furnishes the really vital garment for our thought is the integument that grows by nature. Compare with the words that I have just listed such words as "father," "mother." They afford an extreme example, for they suggest ideas that are more vitally dear to us than all the radiomicrometers in the world; but in a lower degree I think all the words that we have unconsciously absorbed, either from the speech of others or from our own discursive reading, are likewise more intimately ours than those we have exhumed by a deliberate effort from dictionaries.

I myself, therefore, have discontinued that method of teaching English, because it seemed to me a misguided attempt to find a short-cut to culture. Real culture is not to be attained by such means; and the effort does more harm than good by turning the study of literature into an unprofitable linguistic dis-

cipline. Of course, some linguistic difficulties must be explained. Wherever a difficult passage is of vital importance, I would certainly not ignore it altogether. But I want to be rid of the bugbear notion that in teaching beginners we must go through literature with a fine-tooth comb.

A second problem of similar nature is presented by the literary and historical allusions that our students will all the time be encountering. Shall we compel boys to look them up? I think not. Allusions are not made to be looked up—unless possibly they were made for that purpose by Robert Browning. It is true, of course, that there is often a rare pleasure to be won from a graceful allusion whose significance we understand; and it is equally true that we lose almost all the pleasure if we do *not* understand the significance; but if the average beginner is compelled to look it up, I think he loses more than he gains. For a specific illustration, let me take one of Wordsworth's sonnets on "Personal Talk"—the one with the allusions to Una and Desdemona. This sonnet is a favorite with many readers of Wordsworth; it is a favorite, notwithstanding the somewhat sententious tone of its moralizing, just because of those two allusions at the end. After mentioning other themes that he is always glad to talk about, Wordsworth adds, by way of conclusion:

Two shall be named, pre-eminently dear,—
The gentle lady married to the Moor;
And heavenly Una with her milk-white lamb.

Here, of course, our reminiscent sympathy with both these heroines enables us to feel in an instant the point; for each recalls a whole world of associations, pities, loves; the epithet applied to each pleases our æsthetic sense and flatters our critical judgment, and we are fully in sympathy with the poet. But suppose we had never read either *Othello* or *The Faërie Queene*. If then we looked up our two allusions, we should learn something like this:

Desdemona: heroine of *Othello*, by William Shakespeare, married to the hero, a Moor, and by him cruelly murdered out of causeless jealousy. A popular heroine of the English stage.

Una: personifies truth in Edmund Spenser's unfinished poem, *The Faërie*

Queene. Her heavenly humility was aptly symbolized by a lamb which is associated with her in Book I, Canto 1, stanza 4.

Evidently we do not get at the soul of an allusion thus. The only right way to get at the soul of it is by being previously familiar with its subject. If we cannot get at its soul, I have reluctantly decided, as a result of my personal experience, not to try to get at it at all. For the purposes of the beginner's study of literature, I have come to the conclusion that knowledge obtained from books of reference is, in general, not knowledge. For the purposes of æsthetic culture the average man must be content to roam at large over the field, not burrow into it; he is after light and color, not roots and fossils. The time saved from looking up allusions in Wordsworth can be more profitably spent in reading *The Faërie Queene* and *Othello* themselves, or whatever else is best suited to the student's age and temper, and thereby stimulating the pleasure in literature which closer researches are too likely to deaden.

But my paper threatens to end with a recommendation not to teach English at all; for if we are not to study either a poet's language or the things that he is writing about, what, you will say, is left that we *are* to study? Nevertheless, before answering such a query, I purpose defending yet a third exclusion. In my own experience, after I had excluded the detailed study of language and the study of the author's meaning from extraneous sources, I experimented with divers devices for making the value of literature more apparent to young minds, and by slow degrees I eliminated from the study what many will properly regard as one of the most vital features of all literature. I mean the æsthetic study of artistic details. I found it very hard to give to my students any adequate appreciation of felicities of phrase. Suppose, for instance, you are reading *The Ancient Mariner* with a youthful class. You come to this passage:

Sometimes all little birds that are,
How they seemed to fill the sea and air
With their sweet jargoning!

You yourself are sensible of a most exquisite beauty in these lines. You ask one of your pupils what he thinks of Coleridge's

use of that word "jargoning," and he will probably reply; "I don't know: it seems to me sort of foolish." Now, if he does take this view of the passage, you really have no just cause of quarrel with him. Indeed, I am not sure that I would not rather have a healthy youth of sixteen or eighteen feel just that way about it, for in the normal order of intellectual development the æsthetic sense ought not to come first. But the question for the teacher is: What am I to do about it!

Well, of course, something can be done, but there are reasons why we cannot hope to do much. In the first place, it is not only the boy's æsthetic sense that is as yet rudimentary; as I have already said, his vocabulary is in the same condition. One must be widely familiar with the prose uses of words before one can adequately appreciate their poetic uses. The average boy is confronted here by the same difficulty that confronts us all in the reading of French or even Italian poetry. I myself am utterly incompetent to pronounce a critical judgment upon the poetic style of Heredia or Petrarch. I may look up every unfamiliar word in my dictionaries, and make myself absolute master of the specific sense of every passage; but the inner subtleties of the poet's thought will be sure to escape me, because I have not used his language all my life. Just so it is with our average American youth. You can successfully expound to him those beauties of poetic style that do not transcend either his æsthetic sense or his intimacy with the English vocabulary, but unless you have tact enough to restrain yourself within these rather narrow limits, you will certainly be losing your labor. Do not try to plant roses in a soil where roses will not grow. It is a fundamental principle of gardening, I take it, to cultivate only such soils as are able of being cultivated.

But, besides the danger of wasting your energies, there is another specific danger here which is far more serious. You are in danger of making your pupil think of literature as something apart from himself. That, indeed, is what he already thinks. The great majority of young men who come to Yale College think of poetry somewhat as many older men think of Wagner or Botticelli; it is an occult delight for the strange few who

affect an interest in such things, but something quite beyond the ken of the common-sense mind. I think it of the first importance to eradicate this impression; but if you spend much effort trying to make your pupil see things that are beyond the range of his vision, you fix the blight upon him forever. A great deal of this, I am sorry to say, is done in some college classes and in some of the secondary schools—done, of course, with the best intentions, but with deplorable results. It is done by giving boys reading which they are too young to appreciate, and then trying to force them to appreciate it. I am not so pessimistic as to throw over this means of culture altogether; but I do strongly urge that the teacher should be very cautious. He should not keep impressing upon the boy that there is a lot in literature that the boy cannot see there, and does not want to see. Do not dwell upon beauties of poetic diction just because they are there; be sure, first, that your seed will drop into fertile soil.

What, then, *is* the teacher to do? The fundamental principles that ought to guide him, and determine his method, have (I think) been indicated already. We are not, of course, to teach the student what he already knows, or what he can just as well learn himself; but, on the other hand, and especially, we must not try to teach him things that he cannot learn even with our aid. We are not to try to show him all that there is in literature; what we *are* to do is to convince him that there is a great deal in literature *for him*. The best teacher of literature is he who does this best; and the very first requisite for a successful teacher is that sympathy with various classes of minds and various stages of mental development, that knowledge of other people's point of view, that almost unlearnable tact, which enables one to see literature as the youth sees it. The teacher ought, of course, to see for himself all that there is there; but it is more important that he should see this, not only with his own eyes, but also with those of his pupil—including the blind spot.

In proceeding now from generalities to particulars, I realize that I am reaching the part of my paper where it is most unsafe to be dogmatic. There are no rules of universal application. The methods that work with one teacher will not work with

another. If we tried to steer each other, we should be sure of general shipwreck. I intend merely to mention, for illustration, some of the themes which my own experience has seemed to indicate as best for my own class-room discussion.

In selecting details for consideration with my classes, it has often been my practice to try to remember what I myself was interested in at their age. It is somewhat hard to remember, for our own past states of mind are almost as foreign to us as the present ones of the younger generation; but some things are so salient that they cannot be missed. I remember, for one thing, that even at the age of thirteen or fourteen I was much interested in the discussion of personal character. It happened that among the particular knot of schoolboys with whom I was most intimate a favorite pastime was the analysis of the minds of ourselves and of one another. We made our analyses, naturally, in a very untechnical way, and we proceeded upon a very narrow knowledge of the general chemistry of mind; but the feeling that led us to discuss such matters at all was a genuine intellectual interest; and, as I remember it, it was an interest that was capable of being awakened in all sorts and conditions of boys.

Experiment has seemed to show me—and I think almost every teacher of literature has had the same experience—that it is possible to interest more young students in the study of character than in almost any other study. When they are reading Shakespeare they can be made to understand and discriminate very delicate shadings. The reason is obvious: it is that all traits of human character are in ourselves. The titanic heroism of Lear and even the malignancy of Iago are in yourself in embryo. Or, if you are studying, not Shakespeare, but some non-dramatic author, you find that the qualities of the poet himself are somewhere within your own consciousness. The divine vision of Milton, the *saeva indignatio* of Swift, the voluptuous benevolence of Coleridge, are all your own—traits that are perhaps dormant and invisible to your ordinary introspection, but clear enough when they are brought into focus under the light of genius. No wonder, then, that the study of our own passions, as they are manifested in others, and concentrated by the poet's

art, is to most of us a study of unfailing interest, and to the teacher a resource that he can always count on.

But the study of character, as revealed in literature, is not merely one of the things that can be taught successfully; it is one of the most vital things in literature—one of the things best worth teaching; and, above all, it brings literature home to the student and shows him in a convincing way the close relation of literature to life, and especially to *his own* life. It disabuses him of the pernicious prejudice that literature is an esoteric thing for the initiated only.

A second kind of topics that have seemed to be admirably adapted for instruction in our department have to do with moral problems. I should have been skeptical as to this, but for actual experience. A boy's knowledge of the world is limited, but within the limitations of his knowledge his moral sense and his moral judgments are as keen as a man's—perhaps keener. I have asked a class of sophomores whether Hamlet *ought* to kill his uncle; whether he was really to blame for hesitating so long; and I have received in reply more sane common-sense than I have found in all the commentators, and consequently more light on the vexed old question of Hamlet's irresoluteness.

Now, English literature, above all other modern literatures, is charged full with modern ideas. Some of our critics value poetry according to the quantity and solidity of its moral substructure; or at least they profess to do so. I myself have not much confidence in the attempt to test poetry by any such touchstone as that; but certainly the moral ideas in our best poetry constitute a very great part of its value, and if we can in any way reinforce the appeal that these ideas make to our students, we may feel sure that we are doing them a very great service.

I do not mean to recommend turning the class-room into a Sunday school. Our students do not want us to preach to them. But suppose they are reading *Macbeth*. They are interested in the extent to which the hero is influenced by motives of religion, by motives of soldierly honor, by motives of conjugal affection. They are perfectly capable of appreciating the difference, in the sequel, between self-pity and self-reproach, as main-springs of remorse.

Or suppose we are reading *Paradise Lost*. Milton goes out of his way to make the sin of Adam and Eve seem intrinsically as unimportant as possible, and to represent them as utterly ignorant of the meaning of the word "death," with which they are vaguely threatened if they disobey; Milton justifies the ways of God by making them seem preposterously trivial and arbitrary; but why does he do so? The student can be made to see and understand the Puritan idea of religion—the Miltonic idea that in ethics utilitarianism is nothing, and obedience to the law of God is everything. In like manner most of our poets are consciously or unconsciously imbued with a system of ethics that may be either religious or æsthetic or utilitarian; and in reading them your student can generally be made, not only to understand and discriminate, in an elementary way, but also (and especially) to feel that on this side, too, literature has something in it *for him*.

But I am not going over the whole field of literary topics available for discussion. In general, anything that relates to an author's view of life, and his attitude toward life, may be made to impress the student. Suppose you are reading Pope and Keats—if I may be pardoned the enormity of naming the two in the same breath; and suppose you suggest a comparison between Pope's *Belinda* and Keat's *Madeline*. If you carefully direct his examination of the two, he can see that one is a cynic's scoff and the other a poet's dream, but that there are ideals of womanhood that are more complimentary to the fair sex—and therefore, of course, more, just—than either. He cannot see *all* the wit of the one, nor *all* the beauty of the other; you will make a mistake if you try to make him; but he can see the truth and untruth of both. And so in almost any work of the imagination the student can be made to discover some view of life that is new to him, perhaps a view that possesses a very high degree of interest. Is the view clear-sighted and true? Is it over-optimistic or over-pessimistic? Since the author's time, have we advanced or degenerated? If the author is a modern, is he in line with contemporary tendencies, and with our own instinctive feeling? Milton was intolerant, sometimes

crabbed and fanatical; we have left him very far behind; but what have we lost in the journey? Milton had a beautiful vision of paradise; but how would you like to live there? And if it would not suit you, whose fault is it? Milton seems to have a strangely confused notion as to the nature of the place that he calls hell, and as to the effect of hell-fire upon his fallen angels; is it perhaps because in Milton's thought of future punishment there was something much worse than sulphurous flames?

And so forth and so forth. But in suggesting such methods of work as these, I do not mean to recommend any particular topics as worthy of anything like exclusive attention. Other topics, out of which I myself have never been able to make very much, are perhaps the very ones that another teacher would find best worthy of study. In Shakespeare, for instance, I know that many teachers are able to create an absorbing interest in the study of plot-construction, of poetic justice, of dramatic perspective, of the unities, and a multitude of other topics to which I have unfortunately never been able to do even scant justice. I do not, therefore, in laying so much emphasis upon my own experience, presume to recommend any of my particular methods to anybody else. I mean only to obviate the natural objection that such *general* methods have no disciplinary value. In the narrower sense, indeed, they are not disciplinary. Discipline of the stricter sort must undoubtedly be enforced upon even the youngest pupils, in order that they may acquire the rudiments of spelling, grammar, and rhetoric; and a strict discipline is, of course, what we impose upon ourselves, and upon our more advanced students, because *our* stomachs will not reject the strongest medicines; but I hope to see that sort of discipline kept as far apart from the beginner's study of pure literature "as from the center thrice to the utmost pole."

But in the truest sense the kind of treatment that I have been recommending *is* discipline. It disciplines not all one's mental faculties, to be sure, but some of the highest faculties of the intellect and the character. And we must always bear in mind, if it is our lot to be charged with the instruction of any

but the most advanced students, that we are conducting only one of the many departments of instruction in which they are schooled. They are studying mathematics and languages, as well as English literature. We may not altogether like to leave the strict discipline to other departments of study, but we shall be wiser if we do. Suppose—to put an extreme example—that a boy's teacher in English devotes himself chiefly to cultivating habits of methodical exactness, and his teacher in algebra devotes himself chiefly to cultivating the poetical emotions. The supposition is absurd, but it makes clear, I think, the functions of each department. We must make each study do for the boy the service that it is best fitted to do. We, in the English department, shall best break down his resistance to the introduction of culture and knowledge, if we attack him on those sides of his nature where his resistance is weakest. The particular kind of appeal that our teaching can best make to the boy is a kind of appeal that can be made on no other subject as well; and we are not doing our duty if we reject the responsibility.

Such, in brief, are my views as to how literature should be taught to beginners. Our animating purpose is to make them feel attracted to better literature; to make them feel that there is something in it *for them*; and our method, in general, should be by introducing them to modes of thought and habits of reading that are new to them, but *not* beyond them, and not repellant. If the student is not yet ready for Milton, we will not try Milton; we will forget that such a person as Milton ever existed, and will tempt him with the *Idylls of the King*, or *The Vicar of Wakefield*, or even *Alice in Wonderland*; we will make sure, however, of this, that we are giving him something that is new to him, but at the same time not indigestible.

I am well aware of some serious objections to my idea. One is afforded by the college-entrance examinations. Ah, to be sure, there is that English B staring me in the face! For the present I suppose we cannot help ourselves; we shall have to do our unhappy duty with Burke, Milton, Macaulay, and *Macbeth*, working in the old-fashioned way with abstracts, annotations,

tabulations, and all the rest of the regular disciplinary apparatus. But let us not suppose that in doing this we are teaching literature; we are teaching spelling, grammar, and rhetoric, and merely adapting our noble classics to the purposes of text-books in those branches. But it is to be supposed that most of our schools will do some intelligent work in English literature outside of the entrance requirements, where their teachers can work untrammelled; and for my part, I have hope that in time even the entrance requirements themselves may be alleviated.

Another serious objection to the methods I propose is that they are vastly harder for the teacher than the old-fashioned discipline. I can spend a week preparing to make a class take a sympathetic interest in a short poem; but I can force them to learn what its words mean without any preparation at all. Every teacher knows that this is true. The only answer to it—but I think it a sufficient answer—is this: that if that kind of work interests us, we shall be perfectly willing to do it; and if it does not interest us, we ought not to be teaching English literature.

CHARLTON M. LEWIS.

YALE UNIVERSITY.